

“All is vanity except knowing, loving, and serving God”

Jesus called them to him, saying, “Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. (Luke 18:16)



Our title is a quotation from St. Katharine Drexel, and fittingly so. The St. Katharine Drexel Region of the Secular Franciscan Order just celebrated the 25th Anniversary of its formation. When the region was established in 1994, the founding fraternities chose to name it after St. Katharine, in part because she was an American saint who was born and who lived within the territory of the region; and in part because of her connection to Franciscans and Franciscan spirituality.

The outline of St. Katharine Drexel’s life is well known. Born in 1858, she grew up in a very wealthy but devoutly Catholic family. Upon the death of her investment-banker father in 1885, she and her two sisters would become the richest women in Philadelphia, perhaps the country.¹ Despite their life of privilege, her family was widely known for its generosity and charity.

Concerned, in particular, for the condition of Native Americans and African Americans, Katharine took advantage of a private audience in 1887 with Pope Leo XIII in Rome to ask him for missionaries to Indian missions in the United States which she already was supporting financially. To her surprise—and initial bewilderment—he said simply, “Why not, my child, yourself become a missionary?”² This led to her founding of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament in 1891. The order’s apostolate was “rooted in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament and dedicated to the evangelization of Native Americans and African Americans.”³ Thus she became “the debutante who chose poverty over wealth, the oppressed over society, and Christ over comfort.”⁴ Her work and that of her sisters, especially in schools and the education of children reverberates to this day.

Although the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament were not per se Franciscan and had their own rule, St. Katharine included a Franciscan cord when she designed the order’s habit.⁵ In fact, Katharine had been a member of the Franciscan Third Order prior to entering religious life. This is affirmed by an 1891 entry in the order’s *Motherhouse Annals*: “Reverend Mother being a Third Order Franciscan in the world, she was very devoted to St. Francis and wished the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament to be affiliated with the Order. In the early days at St. Michel she had applied for this affiliation and the first Novices that received the Habit in the Chapel of this temporary Novitiate were given the cord of St. Francis by the Most Reverend Archbishop [Ryan].”⁶ It is not clear what exactly was meant by “affiliation,” but the influence of Franciscan spirituality was evident in their way of life with its emphasis on devotion to the Eucharist, in their deep embrace of poverty, and by their evangelical commitment to spreading the gospel.

In time, the connection between the Blessed Sacrament sisters and the Franciscans would become even more tangible and direct. In her efforts to evangelize in the southwest, Mother

Katharine persuaded the St. John the Baptist Province of Franciscan Friars in Cincinnati, in 1895, to begin a mission among the Navajo. Supported by funding from Mother Katharine, they opened St. Michael Mission. A school operated by the sisters followed, opening in 1902. Mother Katharine made trips to the western locations, which included riding hours over open country in a buckboard to reach the mission where the sisters would sleep in a log house.⁷ One of the friars wrote, “Mother Katherine we found to be a very agreeable woman. In fact, she seemed to be simply a sister among her sisters, and she had to be pointed out to us as the superior of the community...she did the same work as the other sisters...Very often I met Mother Superior on her knees scrubbing the porch and sweeping the rooms.”⁸

This brief reflection on St. Katharine barely touches on her life and contributions. Though not a Franciscan religious, she embodied the Franciscan charism. She is an inspiration to us all!



From the OFS Rule and General Constitutions

- As the Father sees in every person the features of his Son, the firstborn of many brothers and sisters, so the Secular Franciscans with a gentle and courteous spirit accept all people as a gift of the Lord and an image of Christ. A sense of community will make them joyful and ready to place themselves on an equal basis with all people, especially with the lowly for whom they shall strive to create conditions of life worthy of people redeemed by Christ. [*Rule*, 13]
- In the spirit of minority, they should opt for relationships which give preference to the poor and to those on the fringe of society, whether these be individuals or categories of persons or an entire people; they should collaborate in overcoming the exclusion of others and those forms of poverty that are the fruit of inefficiency and injustice. [*Constitutions*, 19.2]

For reflection and meditation

- Individually and in fraternity, do you collaborate in overcoming the exclusion of others? Do you place yourself on an equal basis with all people? Are these just ideas or actions tangibly expressed?

¹ Lou Baldwin, *Saint Katharine Drexel, Apostle to the Oppressed*, The Catholic Standard and Times, Philadelphia, 2000, 56

² Baldwin, 3.

³ www.cwatershed.org/blog/2019/mar/3/leo-xiii-st-katharine-drexel-what-about-you/, accessed 10-18-2019.

⁴ Baldwin, cover note

⁵ *Ibid.*, 92

⁶ *Annals, Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament*, vol. 3, 163.

⁷ Fr. Murray Bodo, OFM (ed.) *Tales of an Endishodi*, Fr. Berard Haile and the Navajos, University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1998, 51.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 49, 52-53.